

A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF HISTORY  
The Purpose of God in the World through the Church

The first question this secular world asks the Christian about history is this: How can we <sup>really</sup> believe that God is in history? <sup>So the answer</sup> They say, "We study history and don't find God there at all. We think <sup>the</sup> you church historians find God in history only because you want to find Him there." <sup>It is</sup> ~~It is important to begin with that basic~~ question the world puts to us Christians because if, as they say, there is no God in the history of mankind in general, then anyone pretending to find God in the history of the church is no real historian at all.

But why can't they find God in history? Why are they so reluctant to accept church history as real history? The answer lies in the way professional modern historians tend to study history. Ever since the end of the the Middle Ages when the west entered the period called the "Enlightenment", the dominant philosophies of history have been essentially non-Christian. The medieval "Age of Faith" ended and the so-called "Age of Reason" began. It was then, at the end of the 17th century, around 1690, that the philosopher Descartes told the world, "The beginning of all knowledge is doubt". <sup>Then it was that</sup> And the "Age of Reason" turned into an "Age of Doubt", particularly about religion. In effect, ours is an age of doubt about nearly everything but science. So by the presuppositions of the age of Reason, and by the definitions and methodologies of history which resulted from those presuppositions, any attempt to introduce God into the historical process was rejected, <sup>as</sup> ~~as~~ <sup>unscientific</sup> ~~unscientific~~ at best, superstitious at worst, and in either case "unhistorical", that is, beyond the reasonable scope of serious, professional historians.

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y So for the last 300 years, professional historians have been telling church historians like me, that the trouble with church historians is that they <sup>you</sup> start with faith, and it is their <sup>you</sup> faith, not scientific fact, that brings God into the picture.

August Comte, founder of a popular atheistic view of history, put his case very bluntly almost two hundred years ago, in the 1820s. Man's view of history, he said, in fact his view of all reality, moves through three stages: theological, idealistic, and realistic. The first is the theological stage. In this stage a man or woman attributes everything to God. The second stage is the idealistic, or metaphysical stage. This is when we begin to wake up and reject the idea of a God, but we still look around for a primary cause, some sort of abstracted, philosophical ideal to explain the meaning of human existence. The third and highest stage, said Comte, is positivism. Here we finally realize that <sup>we can never find</sup> all we can <sup>that stated earlier.</sup> ever know is not God, and not even a primary cause. All we can ever really know is observed facts and some kind of relationship between facts.

I. Secular Views of History. Perhaps it would be well for me at this point simply to review some major secular views of history. <sup>let me</sup> I will borrow from a very useful book by David Bebbington (Patterns of History: A Christian View, 1979). He lists <sup>a</sup> four main groups of modern secular historians: the cyclical, the progressive, the historicist, and the Marxist.

The Cyclical view is the old pagan view of history. It sees human history as a great circle, or series of circles, always repeating itself. This view traces back in the West to classical Greece, and in the East to Buddhism. In the 19th century, this view was revived by Nietzsche in a pessimistic, atheistic way; and in the 20th century, by Arnold Toynbee who tried to make it more Christian and more optimistic. He compared the cycles of history, the rise and fall of cultures, to the turning of a chariot wheel. The rim rises and falls, but the wheel itself climbs ever upward to higher forms of religion. "If religion is a chariot", he wrote, "it looks as if the wheels on which it mounts toward heaven may be the periodic downfalls of civilization on earth" (A. Toynbee, Civilization on Trial, Oxford, 1948, p. 234 f.). But from the Christian point of view, ~~it is difficult to see~~ how Toynbee has only substituted religion for fate in a mechanical cyclical view of history. But religion is not God. The question remains, Is the

Christian's God in history?

The second view, the progressive view, would generally answer No to that question. God is not in history, it would say. History is rationalist, or evolutionary, not God-directed. Unlike Toynbee, who somewhat resembles this view in his belief in upward progress, the progressive school of history generally attributes the inevitable progress of the human race not to religion (and much less, of course to God) but rather to man's mind, especially the scientific mind. Some, less human centered, attribute it to the process of natural selection in evolution, as triumphantly suggested by Charles Darwin. Christians, too, can have a sense of progress in history, of course. When Lord Acton, a great historian and liberal Catholic, embraced the idea of progress as a key to history he was perfectly sure that he was being true to his Catholic faith. "Not to believe in progress", he wrote, "is to question the divine government", the sovereignty of God. (See Bebbington, p. 88, citing Cambridge University's Acton Collection MS Add 4987). But there is a dangerous naivete and oversimplification in any identification of human ideas of progress with the will of God in history. The recent history of the world, has exploded the easy optimism of the progress historians. (Read Reinhold Niebuhr's Faith and History for a theological critique of the progress school of history).

The third view is the historicist. It says, stick to the facts. Don't read either your own optimism or your own pessimism into history. Just let the facts speak for themselves. This view traces back to a German school of thought, started by J. von Herder, at the end of the 18th century (1784). It even penetrated church history through the influence of L. von Ranke's History of the Popes. The important question, this school of thought reminds us, is "What actually happened?". Begin with the facts, not a theory", said von Ranke; and only then try to interpret the facts, for history is more than a catalogue of facts. But the problem remains: which facts? No written history can record all the facts. All historians must select some facts and leave out others, as non-essential. So when modern historians decided that God was non-

essential, they left out God, and modern history deteriorated into humanistic relativism. A truly Christian interpretation of history demands a deeper standard of reference than the personal choice of each historian. German history turned nationalistic, and eventually fascist, because its historians were prejudiced in that direction. Latin American historians turned Marxist. There is a danger that some Korean church histories will turn nationalist under the influence of nationalistic minjung theology. And we Americans like to rewrite our own histories too, to suit our national prejudices. A Christian view of history has to be a universal view of history simply because God is universal.

The fourth view of history, the Marxist view is a combination of several of these secular views, but is so discredited now, that I will bypass comment on it and return to our main question. What is the Christian view of history?

II. The Christian View of History. Faced with so sweeping an exclusion of God from history by the modern world's most powerful philosophies of history, how can a church historian like me dare to speak about "the purpose of God in human history", Well, there have been some have been brave enough to try. There is my own teacher, Prof. Kenneth Scott Latourette of Yale. When he was elected President of the American Historical Association, his secular colleagues hoped he would speak as the Professor of Oriental History at Yale. Instead he spoke as the Prof. of Missions at Yale, which was his other title. He spoke about the influence of Christian missions on the history of the world. His reception by that group of secularists was rather cool, but it was the opening gun, as it were, of a Christian counter-attack against history without God.

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That same year, 1949, saw the publication in America of Reinhold Niebuhr's Faith and History. A few years later a highly respected voice was heard from in England at Cambridge University. Sir Herbert Butterfield was appointed Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, and proceeded to cut through all the many different lists of types and categories and schools of history, and

said flatly, "Let us make sure of one thing--in the long run there are only two alternative views about life or about history... Either you trace everything back.. to sheer, blind chance, or you trace everything back to God." ("God in History", in the Ch. of Eng. Newsletter, July 1952; publ. in Herbert Butterfield: Writings on Christianity and History, C.T. McIntire, Oxford, 1979, p. 8).

Butterfield was right. In the long run, without God all the familiar categories--cyclical, progressive, historicist and Marxist--despite their useful insights and partial grasp of important truths, fizzle out in failure like spent rockets. The cyclical view turns history into a squirrel cage; the fragile hopes of the progressives in inevitable progress blow up in our faces with every world war or great depression; the historicists fall to fighting over competing nationalist claims of fault or innocence in the calamities of life; and the Marxists, who pointed to human production as the key to human progress end up unable to feed their own people.

Sir Herbert Butterfield is a prime example of the revival of a Christian interpretation of history among historians. The Regius Professor at Cambridge is no ordinary professor. He is appointed by the King, or Queen. Butterfield<sup>1</sup> succeeded J.B. Bury, a very learned man, but typical of the age of enlightenment, when the old certainties of faith were crumbling before the harsh questions and doubts of the new age of Science. In his very first lecture, <sup>prof</sup> J.B. Bury told his hearers flatly that history has no meaning. He said, in later lectures, that it was not God who changed the whole pattern of history just before the birth of Christ. No, said Bury, it was not God but the shape of Cleopatra's nose! Pure chance, a woman's beauty, he said, beguiled <sup>Julius</sup> Caesar and led to the fall of the Roman Republic and the rise of the Roman Empire. (J.B. Bury, "The Science of History" (1903), and "Cleopatra's Nose" (1916), in Selected Essays of J.B. Bury, ed. H. Temperley, Cambridge, 1933, and cited by C. T. McIntire, p. xxviii).

But after Bury the tide turned against those who in the name of science could see no meaning in history beyond history

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itself. The last three Regius Profs. of Modern History at Cambridge have all been active, confessing Christian: David Knowles, a Catholic monk (to 1955); Sir Herbert Butterfield, a Methodist lay-preacher (1955-1968), and Owen Chadwick (1968--), an Anglican and church historian. Out of their writings, and those of other Christian historians, let me try to draw some conclusions about what makes a view of history Christian. Its not just that the writer is a Christian. A Christian writer can write a very secular history. It is how his Christian convictions shape his view of what is important enough in history to pick out as most essential, *That makes his history both <sup>fact & value</sup> true and <sup>worth study</sup> Christian.*

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Some basic Christian convictions about history. There is no guarantee that from now on the Regius Professors of Modern History at Cambridge will all be Christian. The tide may turn again, and education in the west is still prevailingly secular. For a Christian view of history, we must rely not on current trends, but on the basic truths which the Christian faith teaches us about human history. What are <sup>these</sup> these basic truths which make a view of history a Christian view of history? After all, Christian historians differ from each other greatly on many points. But on one thing they do agree: God does manifest his power in history. A Christian interpretation of history begins with God, continues with God, and ends with God. Christian historians in general, I think, would agree on the following main points in the interpretation of history. Let me give you an outline; partly <sup>comes from</sup> ~~suggested by~~ Latourett's address to the American Historical Association, <sup>and part is my own</sup> ~~but~~ much ~~changed~~. A Christian view of history emphasizes six central points: first, creation by God; second, God's gift of free will to humanity; third, man's consequent accountability to God for how he uses God's creation; fourth, the fact of human failure and all its consequences; fifth, the promise and means of salvation; and finally <sup>as</sup> the sixth point, the life and

death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the hinge of history and the hope of the future. These great themes of Christian doctrine are the foundation stones of any Christian view of history.

Take the first point, creation. This is what gives history its only <sup>enduring</sup> sense of purpose. Henry Luce, the founder of Time Magazine and the son of Presbyterian missionaries to China, once wrote, "In the beginning the Creator gave life its meaning and its purpose". Take away a doctrine of creation by a <sup>personal</sup> God, and the writing of history is like writing about squirrels running mindlessly and endlessly round and around in a squirrel cage.

And the second point, human freedom and responsibility. Take that away from our view of history, and we are describing puppets, mechanical dolls wound up and running but with no power of control over themselves and nowhere to go but to run down and rust out.

The third point, accountability, is what keeps history honest. It reminds us that our standard of judging the good and the bad, success and failure, in the record of the human race, is not our own preferences and prejudices, <sup>our standards</sup> but God's built-in purpose for his creation, which is the ultimate good <sup>of</sup> for the whole human race.

The fourth point, the fact of human failure is a warning against pride in human success, and a reminder that what seems to some historians to be great success often turns out to be great failure. I think it was Toynbee who said, "Every great civilization commits suicide".

The <sup>5th</sup> ~~fif~~ point, the promise of salvation, is just the opposite of the fourth point. Whereas the recognition of our human failures keeps us from too much pride, the promise of salvation keeps us from too much discouragement. A Korean once told me, "We Koreans are always a little afraid of tomorrow. We're a small country, and there are ~~so~~ many large and powerful countries around us, hungry to eat us up." But I thought about <sup>some</sup> the Koreans I have known who were not afraid. There was Yi Sang-Jae, head of the YMCA during the 1919 Independence Movement. The Japanese soldiers

arrested him. "Tell us who is the head of this rebellion", they said. "Tell us or we'll kill you." And Yi Sang-Jae, <sup>said</sup> "I'll tell you." And they crowded around him to hear. And Yi Sang-Jae <sup>^</sup>said, "God is at the head of this movement, and there are ten million Koreans behind Him with us in it." He was not afraid of anything that can happen in history, for if the God of history <sup>^</sup>is with us, who can be against us?"

But it is only the sixth point, the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that makes all the other points in our Christian view of history real and believable to the Christian. He is our living proof that God is not only the God who began our history, and the God who is over our history, but the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in Christ came into our history to live with us and to suffer with us, to die for us, and to save us.

I remember how Otto DeCamp told me of an examination of new believers preparing for baptism in a country church in Korea. They had been studying the Catechism, and were being asked questions by the church session. One of them <sup>^</sup>was an old grandmother. <sup>when they came to</sup> <sup>^</sup>And <sup>^</sup>one of the <sup>^</sup>questions <sup>^</sup>was "Where is Jesus now?", <sup>the proper answer</sup> <sup>^</sup>The catechism question they were supposed to have learned <sup>^</sup>was "Jesus, the Son of God, is now in heaven, seated at the right hand of God the Father". But the old grandmother, couldn't quite remember that answer. She thought a minute, then smiled a broad smile and said, "Jesus is right here in my heart". It is a good answer. <sup>I do not fear of the</sup> <sup>^</sup>And it is the Christian answer to all the questions of history. Jesus is God, and He is right here, in history. And that is why Christians <sup>^</sup>should <sup>^</sup>love to study history. <sup>I do not have to afraid of him in they study Jesus</sup>

- Samuel Hugh Moffett

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The Christian Understanding  
of History

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**D**O patterns exist in history? All historians make selections from the multitude of happenings which constitute the quarry in which they work. Do they do so arbitrarily or in accord with what is inherent in the events? If there are patterns, can they be discerned? Is history governed by laws? If so, what are they? Does history have meaning, or is it simply sound and fury, signifying nothing? Does it have an end toward which it is moving, or is it movement without direction? These are questions which continue to trouble members of our craft. In various lands, cultures, and ages they have been repeatedly raised and many answers have been given. Whether in the ancient civilizations of the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, in Hebrew Palestine, in China, in India, in Greece, in Rome, in the Middle Ages of Europe, or in the modern Occident, explicitly or by implication they have been posed and pondered.

\*Presidential address delivered at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in Washington on December 29, 1948. The author is professor of missions and Oriental history in Yale University.

We need no full catalogue to recall how various have been the purposes which have governed selection from the fragmentary records of the past, how numerous have been the patterns which observers of man's course on this planet have seen as giving coherence to the many incidents which are the crude stuff with which historians deal, how diverse have been the laws which have been said to mold the course of events, and the meaning—or the absence of meaning—which has been thought to characterize the stream of human life. Many scribes, both ancient and modern, have centered their stories upon men and women who have loomed large in the collective life of the group—rulers, statesmen, artists, authors, scholars, religious leaders. Some of this, as in early China, has been from a mixture of reverence for ancestors and the desire of insuring prestige to a particular family. Some has been at the instance of those in the public eye who have wished to perpetuate the memory of their greatness—from some of the most ancient inscriptions and chronicles to the archives amassed and preserved by recent Presidents of the United States and the spate of autobiographies which has been mounting since the invention of the printing press. Many arrangements of events have had as their principle of selection admiration and affection for a friend, a teacher, or a saint, or concern for the perpetuation and spread of a religious or political faith—as in the case of Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Lenin. Some historians have centered their narratives upon a war or series of wars—the Peloponnesian struggle, the Gallic Wars, the American Civil War, and World Wars I and II. Many have concentrated on the state and politics. Some, especially in recent times, have viewed economic factors as determinative. Others have attempted to discern a science of society. Influenced by the temper which has characterized much of the Occidental mind for the past few generations, historians have debated whether history is a science. Whatever their answer, in general they have attempted to apply scientific methods to their work. Modern historians usually believe in causation—that events and movements are in large part or entirely determined by preceding events and movements. Yet there are those who declare a time sequence to be all that can be demonstrated. For at least twenty-five hundred years there have been those who have insisted that no meanings or patterns are to be observed in history. Often, as in the case of Yang Chu, this has been in protest against those who believed such to exist. Those who have viewed this world, including human life, as illusion, as has been so widely the case in India, naturally have had little or no regard for history. Many observers across the centuries have believed that history is cyclical, repeating itself. This has been true of the Greeks, of many Buddhists, and of some of the most widely read of modern Occidental authors. Others

have held that progress is discernible, whether by steady movement, by pulsations, or by the dialectical process. Some are passionately convinced that progress culminates in an ideal society in which all man's ills will have been resolved. Others, while believing in progress, do not envision mankind as ever escaping from struggle. These are merely a few of the many attitudes which men have taken as they have sought to record or to understand the past. Some contradict one another. Others can be embraced in a larger synthesis.

Faced with this multiplicity of convictions, it is not surprising that the experienced historian tends to be wary of committing himself to any of them. Yet history cannot be written without some basis of selection, whether artificial and purely subjective or inherent in man's story. A survey of the presidential addresses made before this Association reveals the fact that no one single topic has so attracted those who have been chosen to head this honorable body as have the possible patterns and meanings of history. A few of the addresses have been critical of particular interpretations or even of all interpretations of history. More have presented interpretations—although usually with such modesty and cautious tentativeness as befits those who submit themselves to the judgment of their peers. Frequently the patterns have been assumed or implied.

The historian, then, is faced with a dilemma. On the one hand he is painfully aware of the many interpretations and philosophies of history which have been put forward and is therefore hesitant to accept wholeheartedly any one of them. On the other hand he is confronted with the necessity of acting on some principle of selection, even though it be arbitrary, and is haunted by the persistent hope that a framework and meaning can be found which possess objective reality.

This hope is peculiarly insistent in our day. We appear to be living in a time of major revolution. As historians we are familiar with many earlier periods of rapid change. Indeed, if there is one feature which we are agreed upon as characterizing history it is flux. It seems probable that no culture—if we can assent to the existence of such an entity—and no institution remains permanently unaltered. Yet so far as we are aware, never before has all mankind been so drastically on the march. Never at any one time have so many cultures been in what appears to be disintegration. In no other era have all men been faced with such colossal possibilities of what they deem good and ill. Never before has the race as a whole been so assailed by those who urge upon it dogmatically one or another interpretation of the historical process to explain and to guide in humanity's painful transition.

May I make bold under these circumstances to invite your consideration to one of the oldest interpretations of history, the one which bears the name Christian? I do so realizing that many now regard it as quite outmoded, as associated with a stage of thinking which mankind is discarding, and as being held only by those who are victims of what is indulgently denominated social lag. I do so as one who accepts the Christian understanding of history and is more and more attracted by what he believes to be the accuracy of its insight. But it is not as an advocate, as one in the long succession of those who would seek to justify the ways of God to men, that I would once more draw your attention to it. I would, rather, raise with you the question of whether the Christian understanding of history may not offer the clue to the mystery which fascinates so many of our best minds.

May I first outline what the Christian understanding of history is? Then may I go on to suggest the degree to which it eludes testing by the methods employed by historians of our day? May I next note the ways in which it can be approached by these methods and indicate possible conclusions from these tests? The subject is rendered pertinent partly by reason of the claims which continue to be made for the Christian understanding of history, partly because, through the geographic expansion of Christianity, the Christian view is held by individuals and groups in more and more peoples and is, indeed, more widely spread than any other, in part from the challenges, some old and some new, to which the view is submitted, and because recent experience may shed fresh light on a familiar question.

What is the Christian understanding of history? At first sight there may seem to be no single view held by all Christians and given the Christian name, but rather a number of views, related but reciprocally contradictory and having little in common. Some differences are to be found near the very beginning of Christianity and are imbedded in the earliest documents of the faith, those assembled in the New Testament. Most of the others arise from varying interpretations of these documents.

The chief differences are quickly summarized. Jesus had much to say of what he called the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God. Presumably he meant by this the doing of God's will, for one of the central petitions of the prayer which all Christians agree to have been taught by him, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven," in the fashion of Hebrew poetry makes the second part repeat in different words the idea in the first part. But Christians disagree as to how and when that petition is to be answered. Is the Kingdom of God to come by slow stages and by the cooperation of men until God's will is perfectly accomplished—within history?

This view was widely cherished in Protestant circles late in the nineteenth century and in some quarters survives today. It is believed to have support in the words of Jesus. This, obviously, is akin to evolution and has been congenial to many who have accepted the evolutionary hypothesis. The opposite view has been held that the world is becoming no better, and, indeed, may even be deteriorating, and that God by His own unaided act will bring history to a sudden dramatic end and will then accomplish His perfect will. Eminent scholars have contended that Jesus himself expected this consummation and very soon. From time to time through the centuries there have been those who have believed the end of history to be imminent. Indeed, we have them with us today. Some Christians identify the Kingdom of God with the Church. Others would not so identify it. Some have held that the human will is so hopelessly corrupted by sin that every effort by man to better his condition is foredoomed and that we must quietly wait for God to accomplish His purposes. Others, with more confidence in human ability, make God dependent on man's efforts in bringing in the Kingdom.

Striking and important though these differences are, they occur within a framework to which most informed Christians give general assent. They state their faith in a wide variety of ways, but back of the many formulations lies a large measure of agreement. Christians believe that God is the creator of the universe and rules throughout all its vast reaches, whether, to man, the unimaginable distances and uncounted suns or the inconceivably minute world of the atom, whether in what men call matter or in what they call spirit. This means that man lives and history takes place in a universe, that all of reality is one and under the control of God, and that the human drama is part and parcel of the far larger unity of God's creation. Ultimately and in His own way, so the Christian view maintains, God is sovereign in the affairs of men. Physically frail though he is, man, the Christian declares, was created in the likeness of God and with the possibility of fellowship with God. For this reason, as the Christian sees it, mankind is one; history embraces all mankind and is universal. In creating man in His image, God gave to man a certain measure of His own free will. Man's freedom is limited by various factors, among them heredity and physical and social environment, but his freedom is still real. Human history is in large part tragedy, and the tragedy consists in man's abuse of his freedom. Man is prone to ignore the fact that he is a creature. In one fashion or another he arrogates to himself full autonomy and seeks to do not God's will but his own will. He places other loyalties above his loyalty to God and gives to them the allegiance due to God. Thus one's own fancied security and pleasure, the family, a set of

ideas, the state or some other organization, even a church, may be given priority. God, who is always working in the universe and in history, meets this perversion of man's will, so the Christian goes on to say, in two ways, by judgment and by mercy. Through what are sometimes described as His inexorable laws written into the structure of the universe and so in man's own constitution and environment, God judges man and whatever man sets up in place of God. Hence comes most of man's misery and frustration. But God wishes man to repent, and as often as men truly repent, whether individually or in groups, He forgives them and gives them fresh opportunity to grow toward the purpose which He has for them. Ultimately God will triumph. History moves toward a culmination. Whether within or beyond time God's will is to be accomplished and His full sovereignty will be seen to have prevailed.

Thus far the Christian understanding of the universe and of history resembles several non-Christian views. What is here outlined is largely true of Judaism, to a certain extent of Islam, and has partial parallels in theistic or near-theistic systems in China, ancient Persia, and elsewhere.

The distinctively Christian understanding of history centers upon historical occurrences. It has at its heart not a set of ideas but a person. By a widespread convention historians reckon history as B.C. and A.D. They are aware of many other methods of recording dates and know that this particular chronology has acquired extensive currency because of the growing dominance during the past few centuries of a civilization in which Christian influences have been potent. To the Christian, however, this reckoning of time is much more than a convention. It is inherent in history. In Jesus of Nazareth, so the Christian holds, God once for all disclosed Himself and acted decisively. The vast majority of Christians believe that Jesus was God incarnate. Historians are well aware of the long debates and the ecclesiastical struggles, some of them in stark contradiction to the love which is the supreme Christian virtue, over the relation of the divine and human in Jesus. That so many of the debates should have been an occasion for this temper is part of a larger problem to which we must later recur and which had its most dramatic and, so Christians believe, its decisive expression in the crucifixion of Jesus. In spite of and, perhaps, in part because of their acrimony, the controversies over the relation of the human and divine in Jesus are evidence of the struggle of the human mind and spirit to comprehend what Christians hold to have been a quite unique event. The large majority of Christians agree with the conviction expressed in one of the early Christian documents, that in Jesus the eternal Word which was and is God became flesh. In Jesus,

so Christians maintain, God's Kingdom began in a fresh way. This was partly because Jesus, being both God and man, disclosed by his life and his teachings what God intended man to be and what man might become. It was also because in and through Jesus God revealed His inmost nature and accomplished a work of central and supreme importance.

God, so the Christians declare, is love. The English word "love" is clumsy and ambiguous. It is used to cover a wide range of meanings. The Greek which the early Christians employed was more discriminating. But even that was inadequate. In "love," as that term is applied to God, the Christian discerns a self-giving which can never be perfectly described in words but which was disclosed in Jesus. This love was especially seen in the death of Jesus. Here, as one of the earliest Christians declared, although it appeared to be weakness and folly, were displayed both the power of God and the wisdom of God.<sup>1</sup> The crucifixion was followed by the resurrection. Through the resurrection, so Christians believe, God demonstrated that physical death not only does not end all but that it may be a stage in an endless life beyond history which is not merely continued existence—this might be and presumably will for some men be extraordinarily unhappy—but which is one of growing fellowship with God, God who is love. In the earliest documents the name for what God did in Jesus is not Christianity: it is Gospel, "Good News." The Gospel judges man by making clear as in no other way man's perversity and sin. It also releases life to overcome that perversity and sin. The purpose of God in history is that men shall be "conformed to the image of His son."<sup>2</sup>

The Christian understanding of history goes on to say that following the crucifixion and the resurrection God continued to operate through what Christians call the Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit men can be remade and can enter upon the radiant, eternal life which from the beginning was God's plan for men. Those who have that life are characterized by faith, hope, and especially love, the kind of love which is of the very nature of God. They form a fellowship, the Church, which takes on a visible form or forms within history but which is never completely identical with any historic expression and continues beyond history. The course of history is God's search for man. God is judge, but He judges man that He may save him and transform him. God's grace, the love which man does not deserve and cannot earn, respects man's free will and endeavors to reach man through the incarnation, the cross, and the Holy Spirit. Here, to the Christian, is the meaning of history and its unifying core.

<sup>1</sup> I Cor. 1:18-25.

<sup>2</sup> Rom. 8:29.

From the outset, the Christian view of history has embraced all men. From the Christian standpoint man is not necessarily central in the universe. There may be many other beings and on other planets or in other stellar systems whom God creates in His likeness, to whom He gives free will, and who abuse that free will. If so, His love also seeks them. If God is love, His love must be at work in all the universe. Yet on this planet God's love certainly includes all men. The early disciples were commanded to be "witnesses" "unto the uttermost parts of the earth,"<sup>3</sup> to "make disciples of all nations," baptizing them, and teaching them to observe all that Jesus had commanded his original followers.<sup>4</sup> This, presumably, also becomes the obligation of all subsequent Christians. It implies that the Christian goal can be nothing short of the full obedience of all men to God as He disclosed Himself in Jesus. This would entail the complete transformation of human society to bring society into entire conformity with God's will for man. Yet it seems clear that neither Jesus nor the early Christians expected within history the full conformation of mankind to the "measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."<sup>5</sup> Both the wheat and the tares, the good and the evil, were expected to "grow" until the consummation of history.<sup>6</sup> Beyond history, presumably outside of time, God is "to gather together all things in one in Christ, which are in heaven and which are on earth."<sup>7</sup> God has always been sovereign, and in the cross and the resurrection He signally triumphed,<sup>8</sup> but beyond history His sovereignty is to be seen as complete.

The Christian understanding of history differs radically from other views. It is in contrast with the ancient Persian dualism, for the latter implies separate origins of good and evil. This dualism means that the good God is not sovereign in history, because He has not created the universe as a whole, whereas Christianity regards God as creator and lord of all. Only a sovereign God can forgive sins as the Christian believes Him to do. Nor is Christianity pantheistic, as is so much of Indian philosophy, for it does not make God the author of what men call evil. Man's misery, so Christianity declares, arises from the abuse of the free will which God has given him. The Christian understanding of history is not exclusively cyclical. It recognizes eras and ages, but it holds that novelty enters, that new things happen. The great event, as the Christian sees it, was Jesus and Jesus was without precedent. So, too, the consummation will be new. Some interpretations of history seem to expect perfection within history, the coming of the ideal human society. This is the communist message. It appears to have been true of Comte and

<sup>3</sup> Acts 1:8.<sup>7</sup> Eph. 1:10.<sup>4</sup> Matt. 28:19, 20.<sup>8</sup> Col. 2:15.<sup>5</sup> Eph. 4:13.<sup>6</sup> Matt. 13:24-30.



of Hegel. The Christian understanding of history does not necessarily deny progress. Obviously, the criteria for measuring advance must be established before we can say whether progress has occurred, and the Christian criteria are peculiarly Christian—growth in the likeness of God as God reveals Himself in Jesus. Christians are not agreed as to whether progress occurs in history. Some affirm it and others deny it. Yet few if any Christians have maintained that man will attain his full destiny within history.

All this is, or should be, a commonplace to historians. It is simply an attempt at a restatement of what the majority of Christians have always believed. Many Christians would add to this or would amplify it. Many would regard it as inadequate and incomplete. Yet the overwhelming proportion would say that so far as it goes it is a summary of what Christians have held and hold today to be the Christian view of history. I would apologize for repeating it were it not necessary for any assessment of the Christian understanding of history.

Several features of the Christian outlook must be especially noted if the historian would seek an appraisal by the standards which the members of his craft are currently inclined to apply.

First of all, he must be clear that here are frankly a perspective and a set of values which are the complete reverse of those which mankind generally esteems. We are told that unless a man is born again not only can he not enter, but he cannot even see (or presumably recognize) the Kingdom of God.<sup>9</sup> On one memorable occasion the "prince of the apostles" was rebuked by Jesus for thinking like man and not like God.<sup>10</sup> This was because he was shocked by the prospect of the crucifixion and sought to dissuade his master from it. Centuries before Jesus a famous story of the one of the prophets who was counted as among his greatest predecessors declared that God was not in the thunder nor in a mighty wind, where He was expected, but in a still small voice.<sup>11</sup> Another of the prophets in whose succession Jesus stood was emphatic that God's thoughts are not man's thoughts nor man's ways God's ways.<sup>12</sup> Of the crucifixion Paul declared that the "wise man" and the "scribe," namely the scholar, completely miss its significance and that God makes foolish the wisdom of this world.<sup>13</sup> In other words, if he is to understand history as God sees it, the historian must focus his attention upon events which he would normally ignore. From the Christian standpoint, the usual historian has an entirely distorted view of history and misses the most important features. This, may we add parenthetically, may be true of those who

<sup>9</sup> John 3:3, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 55:8.

<sup>10</sup> Matt. 16:23.

<sup>13</sup> I Cor. 1:20.

<sup>11</sup> I Kings 19:11-13.

deal with ecclesiastical as well as with political, economic, or intellectual history.

Even when the historian gives attention to the events which the Christian understanding deems most significant he may miss their real import. There is deep meaning in the plea, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."<sup>14</sup> Had those who crucified Jesus dreamed that they were executing the Son of God they would, presumably, have drawn back in terror or in horror.

In the second place, the historian must recognize that from the viewpoint of Jesus the individual is of outstanding importance. In this he declared that he was expressing the mind of God. The Christian faith exalts the individual. Each human being, as we have said before, is regarded as intended for fellowship with the eternal God Who is love. It was to individuals that Jesus gave his attention. He healed men one by one. Some of his best remembered sayings and parables were to single persons. He spoke again and again of the value which God places on individuals. The concern of God for the erring, so he said, is like that of the shepherd who leaves the ninety and nine who are safe in the fold and seeks for the one sheep who is lost until he finds it,<sup>15</sup> or like the father who longs for the return of a wayward son and rejoices when he appears, repentant.<sup>16</sup>

Jesus was deeply concerned for the fate of his people. In his day Palestine was seething with unrest which a few years later broke out in open revolt and was followed by the destruction of Jerusalem. He clearly foresaw what was coming, as must any intelligent, well-poised observer who took account of the mounting nationalistic and religious fanaticism and who knew the power of Rome. He believed that the destruction had not been unavoidable, that had its inhabitants been willing to heed him Jerusalem might have escaped, but that they were so blind that the doom of the city was sealed. So deeply pained was he by the prospect that he wept.<sup>17</sup>

Yet so far as we know Jesus never engaged in politics. Indeed, at the outset of his public career he had put aside as a palpable temptation the suggestion that he enter the political arena.<sup>18</sup> To be sure, he was accused of treasonable aspirations and was crucified derisively as "the King of the Jews,"<sup>19</sup> but it is quite clear that he believed his kingdom to be "not of this world"<sup>20</sup> and that as applied to what he had in mind and what he believed to be God's purpose, the term had for him far other significance than that given it by men. From the standpoint of political wisdom and when viewed prudently the

<sup>14</sup> Luke 23:34.  
<sup>18</sup> Luke 4:5-8.

<sup>15</sup> Luke 15:3-6.

<sup>16</sup> Luke 15:11-24.

<sup>19</sup> Mark 15:18, 26; Luke 23:1, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Luke 19:41-44.

<sup>20</sup> John 18:36.

program which Jesus followed seemed the sheerest madness. On the visit to Jerusalem which issued in his death he pursued a course which could not but bring down on his head the wrath of the established authorities of religion and the state and yet he declined either to flee or to permit his followers to organize or to use armed force to defend him and his cause.

However, in the third place, Jesus did not ignore the social structures of mankind. He said much of the relation of individuals to other individuals and declared that the corollary of love for God is love for one's neighbor.<sup>21</sup> The Kingdom of God, of which he so often spoke, is a society. Men are to enter that Kingdom one by one. When they enter it, as they can here and now, they are to act as its members and as though the Kingdom were already here. The standards of that Kingdom are so far above the actual attainments of any other society that Christians as members of the Kingdom are always a revolutionary force. It is not the purpose of the Gospel to save any culture. The rise and fall of cultures and empires are important in so far as they affect individuals, but the rise and fall may harm the individual no more than do the cultures and empires themselves. There is that in the Gospel, so Christians maintain, which enables individuals to pass through such experiences triumphantly, centers of healing and strength. Indeed, the collapse of an empire or a culture may make it possible to build what, from the Christian standpoint, is better. Christians must always challenge any civilization in which they are set. Yet they are not to be primarily destructive but constructive. They are to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world."<sup>22</sup>

Here at last appears to be something tangible on which the historian would like to believe that he can lay his hand and begin to measure. Surely he can determine where Christians, because of their faith, have been a molding force in history. Yet he is warned that, since the Christian set of values is different from that of the rank and file of men, the record of the accomplishments of Christians may not be preserved in the documents on which he relies. "The last shall be first and the first last."<sup>23</sup> The Kingdom of God, he is told, comes not by observation. Neither can men say about it "lo here and lo there."<sup>24</sup>

In the fourth place, the Christian understanding of history regards history and time as surrounded by eternity. Christianity centers upon historical events and views God as acting in history. Yet it holds that the human drama is not completed in time, and that one must go beyond the events with which the historian deals and even beyond what is still to occur in

<sup>21</sup> Matt. 22:34-40.

<sup>22</sup> Matt. 5:13, 14.

<sup>23</sup> Matt. 19:30.

<sup>24</sup> Luke 17:20, 21.

time in order completely to see God's dealings with man. Of necessity and by its very nature history deals with time. Christianity centers upon events in time and also transcends them.

When he is confronted with the Christian understanding of history the historian may well feel baffled and even impatient. He may say with a wry smile that the Christian is like the Taoist who declared that those who know do not speak and that those who speak do not know.<sup>25</sup> Some of the key Christian convictions about history are not and cannot be subject to the tests which the historian is able to apply. For instance, the historian can neither absolutely prove nor disprove that God created man in His own image. Obviously he cannot reach beyond time and verify the Christian conviction concerning the goal of history. God cannot be fully known within history. If He could, He would be limited and would cease to be what the Christian faith believes Him to be.

The difficulty is inherent in the methods to which the historian is confined. He must deal with records. Through whatever channels are open to him he must attempt to determine what actually happened. The records which are accessible to the historian are usually very faulty. In appraising them and in arranging and interpreting events the historian relies on his reason. He knows that in most of the records and in his arrangement and interpretation of them there is subjectivity, a subjectivity from which he can never be entirely emancipated. He seeks through reason to reduce the subjective element to a minimum, but if he is honest and well equipped he knows something of the limitations of reason and also suspects that the subjective element can never be completely eliminated. The historian is himself part of history. He is caught in it and cannot fully stand apart from it or view it with undiluted objectivity.

These limitations on his work handicap the historian in all his endeavors, including his attempt to appraise any interpretation of history. It is not merely when he applies his tools to the Christian understanding of history that he is hampered. The historian is dealing with visible events, but there are also invisible forces which he cannot measure. If he is not to do violence to history the historian can never abstract fact from value. Yet his training, at least as usually given in our day, does not equip him to deal with the latter. Unless he is a thoroughgoing skeptic, the historian tries to discover a standard of values. Christianity professes to provide him with an absolute criterion. Yet by the processes which he normally employs the historian is

<sup>25</sup> *Tao Te Ching*, 56.

clumsy and baffled when he comes to appraise the Christian or any other set of values.

However, limited though they are, the historian must employ such tools as he possesses. When he does so, much comes to light which tends to support the Christian understanding of history. The historian as historian can neither refute nor demonstrate the Christian thesis, but he can detect evidence which suggests a strong probability for the truth of the Christian understanding.

Increasingly it is apparent that history must be seen in its entire setting and that that setting is the universe. This is what the Christian has all along contended. More and more man by the scientific method is recognizing that the universe is orderly. This supports theism. An orderly universe which can be explored by human reason implies a reason and a will controlling that universe to which the human mind is akin.

In the development of life on the earth there seems to be purpose. Man appears to be the culmination, at least at this stage, of the life process on the planet. So far as we know, man is the only creature who is interested in his own past and in seeking to understand the universe. It is quite unlikely that this is the outcome of blind chance. Moreover, in support of the Christian conviction, as life reaches what we believe to be higher stages, the biological process appears to be increasingly interested in the individual rather than the mass. Certainly individuals are more and more differentiated from one another.

The Christian belief about what happens beyond history gives relevance to the development of life on the earth. As we have said, it appears to be true that this development issues in ever higher forms of life of which man is, at least in the present stage, the highest. But man is obviously incomplete within history. He has longings which cannot be satisfied in the brief span of the existence of individuals in this flesh. The Christian view of history regards what occurs beyond physical death as essential to the realization of man's capacities and holds out confident hope of that fulfillment. This is what is embraced in what the theologian terms apocalypticism and eschatology.

The Christian conception of man provides an intelligible and reasonable explanation of the tragic dilemma in which man increasingly finds himself. On the one hand man aspires to understand the universe and adds more and more to his fund of knowledge. This is what we would expect if man, as the Christian faith declares, is created in the image of God. Man is thinking God's thoughts after Him. It is clear, too, that were man to follow the law

of love which the Christian declares is written by God in man's nature, he would be freed from the ills which he now brings on himself. He would live in reverence and love of God and love of his neighbor. War would be banished. Men would co-operate the globe over in utilizing the resources of their environment for the physical and spiritual well-being of all. Just as clearly, through his departure from this law man brings on himself misery. The more his knowledge and mastery of his physical environment increase, the more man employs them on the one hand for his benefit and on the other for his woe. Indeed, through his misuse of that knowledge he threatens the existence of the civilization which he has created and even the race itself. In this the Christian sees the judgment by which God seeks to constrain man to do His will.

But what of the redeeming love which the Christian believes God to have displayed in Jesus? What evidence, if any, is there that this is present and is proving effective? It is, of course, clear that Jesus lived, that he taught and was crucified, that his disciples were profoundly convinced that he was raised from the dead and in the strength of that conviction set out to win the world to allegiance to him. As the centuries pass the evidence is accumulating that, measured by his effect on history, Jesus is the most influential life ever lived on this planet. That influence appears to be mounting. It does not increase evenly but by pulsations of advance, retreat, and advance. It has had an unprecedented growth in the past four and a half centuries and especially in the last century and a half. Christianity is now more widely spread geographically than it or any other religion has ever been. Only a very few peoples and tribes exist where it is not represented by organized groups.

This advance has been associated with the expansion of the Occident. As we all know, that expansion is a recent historical phenomenon. As we also know, Western Europe, from which that expansion stemmed, appears to be waning and at times it seems that in Western Europe itself Christianity is declining. Yet nations, notably the United States, which trace their source to Western Europe, are still continuing the expansion of the Occident, and the culture which had its origin in the West spreads ever more widely and rapidly. It has become global. That Occidental civilization is in part the product of Christianity is obvious. In art, literature, thought, education (for universities and many other new types of schools have owed to it an incalculable debt), in morals, and in social, economic, and political institutions Christianity has been a major factor. Democracy as the West understands that term is largely its child. A case can be made for the claim that science sprang from Christianity. Precisely to what degree Jesus is responsible for

Western culture is by no means clear. On that question large volumes could be written and the answers would not be definitive. Now the expansion of the Occident and its culture has by no means been an unmixed blessing to mankind. If Jesus has had a major share in the development of that culture and in its dynamic spread, we may well ask whether the redemption which the Christian declares that God wrought through him has been sufficiently potent to offset the ills that have accompanied the growth of what is often described as Christendom.

As the influence of Jesus has spread geographically, various results have followed which are evidence that the transforming power which Christians claim for it is at work. Because of it more languages have been reduced to writing than through all other agencies in the history of mankind. Literacy is not an unmixed blessing, but it can be and has been used to further the enrichment of man's life. Through the expansion of Western peoples and their culture, mankind has for the first time been brought together. To the degree that this is the result of the influence of Jesus it is a partial implementation of the dream of the unity of mankind which is a feature of the Christian understanding of history. The struggle to regulate and eventually to eliminate the wars which make our shrinking globe so perilous a neighborhood owes much to Jesus. That he was potent in such pioneers of international law as Francisco de Vitoria and Hugo Grotius is well attested. He can also be shown to have had a part in the initiation of the Hague conferences of the last generation. Such attempts at world-wide co-operation as the League of Nations and the United Nations are demonstrably to some extent from him. However, just how large his share has been in these achievements cannot accurately be measured.

Much clearer is the decisive part which Jesus has had in the efforts to combat slavery and other forms of the exploitation of men by their fellows. It is significant that the first Christian priest ordained in the New World, Bartolomé de Las Casas, was the chief pioneer in the struggle to protect the Indians against the cruelties of the Spaniards, to write humane statutes in the Laws of the Indies, and to seek their enforcement. The list is long of the Spanish and Portuguese laymen and clergy who, inspired and sustained by their Christian faith, labored to guard the non-Europeans in the colonies in both hemispheres from the callous selfishness of their fellow countrymen. The place of his Christian faith in impelling Wilberforce in his campaign against the Negro slave trade is well known. So, too, is the role of the Quakers, Samuel Hopkins, and those touched by the Finney revival, consciences made sensitive by commitment to the Christian faith, in the movement for the

emancipation of Negro slaves in the United States. We are all aware of the efforts of the Christian missionary, David Livingstone, to curb the slave trade in Africa itself. Less familiar is the share of such Christian missionary leaders as John Philip and Cardinal Lavigerie in the campaign against African slavery. Christianity has been one of the most potent forces making for the liberation and advance of the depressed classes of India. Jesus was a major inspiration of Gandhi. In land after land he has contributed to the emancipation of women. In the impact of Occidental upon non-Occidental peoples Christian missions and other agencies inspired by him have made for improved medical care, for public health, for better methods of agriculture, and for schools and universities better adapted to the new day than were their predecessors. Increasingly these features of the influence of Jesus have been spreading and now in varying measure embrace mankind.

More and more the ecclesiastical organizations which we call churches are becoming world-wide. They seek, not unsuccessfully, to perpetuate the influence of Jesus and to incarnate the self-giving and the fellowship which are of the essence of the Christian Gospel. Their divisions and quarrels are familiar to the historian, but in spite of them the churches have become global. The largest, the Roman Catholic Church, is to be found in almost every land and people. The non-Roman Catholic churches are fully as widely distributed and have been drawing together through new types of organizations, several of which include some Roman Catholics.

The transforming love of God through Jesus is seen, so the Christian believes, not only in collective movements but also and primarily in individuals. Some of these individuals loom large in the records which are at hand for the historian. Among these are Paul of Tarsus, Augustine of Hippo, Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, Ignatius Loyola, George Fox, and John Wesley. Indeed, the list could be extended to many pages. What from the Christian standpoint would be a full and therefore an accurate list can never be compiled, for it would need to include untold millions for whom no record survives. Moreover, for those whose records we have, we cannot determine with complete accuracy just which qualities and changes of character are due to the Christian faith and which to other factors. For the qualities of character, too, which the Christian view prizes no accurate measurements are possible. They are real, but are not capable of being plumbed by the methods which are at the historian's disposal. Nor can we judge their full effects on other lives and upon human society as a whole. Yet we have enough information to permit some generalizations which possess rough accuracy. We know that under Christian influence changes in character



take place. Sometimes these appear to be sudden. More often they come by gradual, almost imperceptible stages. In some lives they are outstanding. In many they are slight. Yet when we see them we recognize them. They are the qualities commended in the Sermon on the Mount and in other parts of the Gospels and in the Epistles of the New Testament. Often we find them nourished in small groups of those who have sought to commit themselves fully as Christians. Indeed, those in whom the Christian faith predominates as a transforming force have always been small minorities. Yet often they have had effects which far outstrip their own borders.

These many results of Christianity, in society at large, in individuals, and in groups, are what we would expect from what the Christian calls the Holy Spirit. They are, so the Christian maintains, in consequence of stimuli issuing from the divine initiative, stimuli marked by the characteristics displayed in Jesus and tied up historically with him. Yet they are more than the lengthened influence of a great life. The Christian understanding of history is that it is through the Holy Spirit which is God Himself that God continues to work in history. Thus God respects man's will but continuously brings His love to bear on man. It is through the Holy Spirit, the Christian believes, that as the centuries pass the influence of Jesus grows rather than wanes.

Somewhere in this region lies a possible explanation of one of the most perplexing questions provoked by the Christian understanding of history. Why is it that what the Christian deems evil and good continue side by side in individuals and in groups? Why do even ecclesiastical bodies display both, bodies presumably the result of God's love, the embodiment of the Christian community of love? Why do some of the chronic ills of mankind, notably war, attain their most colossal dimensions in lands and through peoples that have long been under Christian influence? Why are some of what seem to be the gifts of God and the effects of Christianity twisted to man's hurt? Here we recall the fashion in which science and its fruits are so often turned to man's destruction. Has God failed? Is His sovereignty compromised? Is His salvation through Jesus frustrated? Is the influence of Jesus, though growing, always to be a minority force, outstripped by the forces opposed to it and perhaps even provoking them to greater activity? Is, therefore, the Christian view of history an illusion?

As we meditate on these persistent questions we need to remind ourselves again that the Christian understanding of history presupposes a degree of freedom of man's will, sufficient for man to accept or reject God's love. We must also recall that the issues are not new. They are posed in their most vivid form in the crucifixion of Jesus. Here, as the Christian sees

it, man's blindness to God's purpose and man's self-assertiveness were in stark contrast with the seeming weakness and futility of God's chosen way of showing His love. Indeed, this is what we should expect if the Christian teaching of man and God is in accord with the facts. Man's rebellion becomes most marked when God's love is most clearly displayed. In the cross and in the other perversions of God's gifts is seen the judgment as well as the love of God.

Yet, if God is love and is sovereign, His judgments must be a way to the triumph of His love. It is, therefore, not surprising that following the crucifixion there came a fresh release of power in the lives of those who began to see something of the significance of the death of Jesus and freely accepted the forgiveness and love of God. It is understandable that the cross became the symbol of the Christian faith and has been the confidence and inspiration of millions to face triumphantly the evil in them and about them. Similarly the abuses of God's love which have followed the crucifixion and have been painfully apparent in those cultures where the influence of Jesus has been most marked have been the occasion for millions to seek to eliminate the evils of which they are the symptoms and thus have given rise to something better than had been there before, both in individual lives and in the collective life of mankind.

The struggle continues. Civilization becomes more complex. All mankind is bound together ever more closely in the bundle of life and the disorders of one segment affect the whole. Yet the efforts to combat these disorders mount and more and more make themselves felt throughout the earth. Increasingly they have a major source in Jesus, and what Christians have believed about his birth, his life, his death, and his resurrection. Here is one of the strongest reasons for confidence in the accuracy of the Christian view of history. The historian, be he Christian or non-Christian, may not know whether God will fully triumph within history. He cannot conclusively demonstrate the validity of the Christian understanding of history. Yet he can establish a strong probability for the dependability of its insights. That is the most which can be expected of human reason in any of the realms of knowledge.